Capital of Culture
Appendix 4: Press Cuttings

A4.1 Selection of Press Cuttings

A4.1.1 On the following pages are reproduced a selection of press cuttings related to this Scrutiny Review.
Lessons to be Learnt from the Outcome of the European Capital of Culture Bid

Why we came close but not close enough

As the dust settles the time comes for Birmingham to wonder why the Capital of Culture title went to Liverpool.

Art Editor
Terry Grimley
considers why we lost

As John Major said after the 1997 General Election, "Well, a lot of people have been crying lacrimal solution for some years..." - Mr Major.

In fact, the chairman of the judging panel and that Birmingham was "excluded" from the capital of culture list was long ago in the media, based on an impressive arts infrastructure and a multi-cultural population.

So why didn't we win?
Sir Jeremy indicated these weaknesses in Birmingham's bid - two of three directly, and a third indirectly by identifying the strengths of Liverpool's.

1: Birmingham as a region

"How do you sell the city of what you are selling the region?" - Sir Jeremy Isaacs.

Birmingham's decision to ensure the whole West Midlands region in its bid added cultural value to Stratford upon Avon and the Black Country, but it was a disjointed strategy.

How could you link together events in Stoke-on-Trent and Coventry under a "the is Birmingham" tag?

The assumption that the regional approach was a good one was made right at the outset, even before the bid was even set up, and possibly not validated to sufficiently rigorous standards.

It's easy to suspect that getting a yes from the Shakespeare Company on board was just not enough to secure, but drastically expanding the net to include the wider West Midlands administrative area seemed complex.

It did not appear that the regionalisation had been properly thought through.

Yet did it meet with universal approval within the region? I heard recently about a woman who angrily called the bid office from Kidderminster, saying how did Birmingham include its in the bid and demanding that it be withdrawn immediately.

Perhaps these problems could have been satisfactorily resolved by 2008, but all had been successful.

Yet the strategy implied a lack of confidence in the city, or its immediate convention, led to a loss of opportunity for more effective city promotion of the 1990s which, after pictures of the leaves inner ring road, quietly moved on to images of Stratford and Warwick.

2: Architecture

"If Birmingham has lacked anything, it is the concept of exciting architecture as a whole... If Birmingham had had really iconic buildings it would have had a very strong hand of cards" - Sir Jeremy Isaacs.

As someone who has been writing on architecture and urban planning for nearly 20 years that Birmingham desperately needs to raise its architectural profile, it gives me no pleasure at all to see that pugnose come home to roost.

If Birmingham had followed the example of its twin city Strasbourg, which in the early 1980s began to shift its dowdly post-war image by commissioning a series of high-profile architectural projects, its case could by now have been unstoppable.

In a sense, the venue of Birmingham's future could be traced back to the three-town decision taken by the European Commission to say that the city had not included all the cultural attractions.

The power of iconic architecture to transform the image of a city has been amply demonstrated by Guggenheim, which has been the runaway favourite throughout the bidding process, essentially on the strength of one image of its new waterfront.

Instead of building the iconic equivalent of the British Mill, Birmingham blew £50 million of lottery money on Millennium Point, a large box designed by a committee which has had virtually no impact whatever on the city and not much inside it.

The city is now too late to settle for that vision and try too hard (see, for example, the awful new office block now rising in Culture Circus).

This is genuinely puzzling, as well as deeply disappointing.

While part of the problem "great cities have great buildings" do you think Birmingham doesn't understand.

3: Popular support

"If one had to say one thing that was wrong with Birmingham, it would be its lack of support for the initiative" - Sir Jeremy Isaacs.

Liverpool's victory was created by the sound of roaring car horns on its streets. It was a safe bet that the venue wouldn't have happened in Birmingham, where you would have had no opportunity to justify top-rank tourist information judges of Capital of Culture was.

Compared to Liverpool, where no car would have been allowed to end the Capital of Culture spectacular devaluing the streets and the evening newspapers, the Echo, was packed daily with pro-Liverpool material, the Birmingham bid was very far to come to public approval.

To be fair, Big director Stephen Hollowing was disarmingly frank in the statement that the bid was not a public pressing.

Much of it was an unglamorous exercise in burn-bill and bickering. Only a few weeks ago a bid team member was telling me that demonstrating popular support was not one of the bid criteria.

But such a pedestrian approach always seemed to fly in the face of common sense. Why should the committee choose a city whose there was has perceived "bustle around it?"

The failure to an effective arts and minds" campaign within the region was a subject of disagreement even within the bid, teams. Plans for Force Five under Don Mason, a member of the bid committee, to run such a campaign in parallel with the formal bidding process earlier this year were dropped at the last moment.

The case of not maintaining local support was demonised by last month, when the BBC hit its live Battle of the Cities. The programme itself, around and already a drawl and a distaste in the BBC, is unlikely to achieve such levels in the future.

Yet alone on the off-chances of seeing a drawing on the grass and it only at the time of writing, in no time at all.

As well as involving and growing in view of the new states, the council should, of course, decide whether the building of the new city should be the longest term project for the 21st century, but it has been saying that for years.

As the bid, despite its regional context, perhaps the city should have more confidence in its own state.

Drinking that five words enough on addressing the perceived shortcomings in its perception, its potential and its infrastructure came down the road.

Conclusion

While the selection of the city most in need of regeneration was a political decision and the difficulties, the failure of Birmingham's bid highlights some issues that need to be learned if the city is to move on and prosper.

Perhaps, most importantly, it points to a gap in the cities between its cultural establishment (just about enough of us to peak out the nice café for yesterday's announcement) and the wider population.

The third Highways rail heritage, and the will to accept a bid for the same region that still needs to be addressed, urgently.

This links to the architecture situation. Liverpool's bid seemed up in the national profile when the Walker Art Gallery held a public display of rival solutions for the so-called Fourth Green Development on the water front.

By contrast, Birmingham's vision will not be allowed to see or comment on rival designs for the city in Manchester. In fact, can't remember the city ever having an exhibition of rival urban architectural ideas.

In East Midlands do know in the city, the the fact that most people know some new developments are a hanging gone up or that the planning department moved from Basle/Rockefeller House where you could "drop in" on the doff-chappel of drawing and design of the dome in Alum Tower.

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B'Haram Post 05/06/03
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And while the need to energise the local population behind the bid may not have been included in the published criteria, there could perhaps have been more awareness that a failure to do so would put us at a disadvantage alongside cities which are traditionally more demonstrative of their civic pride.

These are problems the bid team might conceivably have done something about. However, the third weakness identified by Sir Jeremy is much more historically-rooted. We really cannot succeed in passing ourselves off as a world-class city when so much of our built environment declares our standards to be provincial – can we?

People travel abroad these days and know what constitutes the best, whether in Barcelona, Gateshead or Bilbao. Increasingly they travel specifically to see it.

Yes, we have a few iconic buildings in the pipeline at last, but there is still no clear evidence that the lesson of Gateshead’s popular success has been learned. It is still by no means clear that the redevelopment of Eastside will live up to its enormous potential, or the rhetoric.

Hopes for Birmingham were high right up to the last moment yesterday morning, and with good reason. Inevitably many people who shared those hopes will be feeling disappointed today.

But many of the headline projects in the bid, like the CBSO and Birmingham Royal Ballet’s collaboration in presenting all Stravinsky’s ballets, or MAC’s £18 million redevelopment, are still expected to go ahead.

Birmingham, like the other four unsuccessful bidders, will be designated a Centre of Culture in 2008. In the immediate aftermath...
Lessons to be Learnt from the Outcome of the European Capital of Culture Bid

Regional projects were proud to be part of bid
Lessons to be Learnt from the Outcome of the European Capital of Culture Bid

We want reasons — not a scapegoat

Sir Albert Bore’s defence of the Capital of Culture bid team is understandable. A witch hunt over Birmingham’s failure to win the prestigious title would serve no purpose.

However, the implication of the council leader’s statement is that Birmingham, if not quite sweeping the matter under the carpet, is at least content not to try to discover why Liverpool won and it did not.

There is the world of difference between jumping in with all guns blazing, seeking to apportion blame, and a measured and professional inquiry into what went wrong and why.

Some of the comments by Liberal Democrat leader John Hemming can be dismissed as political opportunism. If he thought the bid was secretive and arrogant, why didn’t he say so months ago? Perhaps he decided against rocking the boat while the culture judges were still deliberating, although Councillor Hemming is not usually noted for his ship-strengthening powers.

However, Councillor Hemming has a point in that a large amount of public money was committed to the Capital of Culture project and the council should assess whether the bid really did provide value for money.

Secondly, Birmingham’s failure to succeed in another prestige campaign, coming on top of the millennium sages and the national stadium fiasco, is worrying.

Brian Woods-Scawen, the chairman of Birmingham’s Capital of Culture bid, who is a respected businessman and not a politician, said wisely last week that it was vital to investigate further why success was so elusive. Birmingham, he noted, is not good at self-criticism.

Sir Albert Bore’s somewhat prickly response to the call for an inquiry lends credence to Mr Woods-Scawen’s view. No one, apart perhaps from those on the fringes of the political process, wants a scapegoat. But those who care about Birmingham deserve to know what went wrong, and whether the next bid for a grand project could be better handled.